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Groups speak before S. Plainfield council on contaminant increase at Superfund site

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Residents and borough officials learned more about new tests showing higher levels of a cancer-causing contaminant in the Bound Brook near the Cornell-Dubilier Superfund site on Monday, Aug. 4, when federal officials and representatives from a local conservation group spoke before the borough council.

New test results from the former electronics manufacturing site show that levels of polychlorinated biphenyls (PCBs) in a stretch of the Bound Brook were higher in 2007 than levels found in the same portion of the waterway back in 1997. PCBs have been linked to cancer, according to the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency's Web site. They were banned by the agency in 1979.

The samples for the new data were collected last year. The results show an increase in the average concentration of contamination, though not in the maximum concentration.

During the meeting, Rich W. Chapin, an environmental engineer with Chapin Engineering, told the council and residents that the new results mean the EPA needs to make the Cornell-Dubilier site a higher priority.

"We would like (the EPA) to speed everything up," he said, "expedite the investigation."

Chapin has been working with the Edison-based Edison Wetlands Association, a local environmental group that has been critical of the pace at which the EPA has addressed remediation efforts at the site since it was placed on the federal Superfund list a decade ago.

The PCBs are leaking from discarded capacitors dumped in the Bound Brook and around the 26-acre Superfund site. Cornell-Dubilier manufactured capacitors at the site until 1961. A capacitor is a device used in electronics to accumulate and store electricity.

Chapin said an analysis of samples collected at different points in the Bound Brook indicate that the contamination is moving with the water. He recommended installing a fabric to stabilize the stream bank and slow sediment erosion that is causing the contamination to spread.

Pete Mannino, the site's project manager for the EPA, said a handful of major remediation activities will begin within the next year. The agency will install an additional four to five groundwater monitoring wells to help pinpoint the extent of the contamination, according to Beth Totman, an EPA spokeswoman. Twenty wells are collecting data at the site.

The EPA is also reviewing bids from contractors to operate a low-temperature thermal desorption unit at the Superfund site. The device heats contaminated soil to approximately 900 degrees. At that temperature, the contaminants will be vaporized and separate from the soil. The contaminants will then be sent off to an off-site disposal facility.

Mannino also said his agency will begin surveying next month the effect of the contaminants on fish in the Bound Brook. But he said, "everyone's drinking water is safe."

He said the bulk of the capacitors are in a remote section of the brook, which he visually inspects

weekly. But he later admitted that other capacitors are scattered throughout the property.

Mannino said the state Department of Health and Senior Services inspected the results of a previous ecological survey and determined that the only precautionary measure residents needed to take was to avoid eating fish caught in the brook.

Still, Mannino said remediation takes time. The EPA's own timeline shows groundwater remediation will not be completed until 2034.

Once the 26 acres of land is remediated, the PCB levels will have only been reduced to levels safe for commercial property to be found on the site. Robert Spiegel, executive director of the Edison Wetlands Association, said the PCB levels will still be more than 1,000 times too high to meet regulations for residential property.

"I think it's very important that the public understand that at the end of the day, the EPA is going to spend $100 million dollars to clean this up and you're going to be left with a PCB landfill still there," Spiegel said. "...You're still going to be left with a PCB landfill there. It will be there forever."

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